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ABSTRACT

Argument can be defined as a process whereby people reason their way from one set of problematic ideas to the choice of another. This definition implies three primary dimensions; argument is problematic, it is based on the perceptions and choices of people, and its rationality is grounded in a variable logic of more or less rather than a categorical logic of yes or no. Six characteristics of argument along this construct include (1) an inferential leap from existing beliefs to the adoption of a new belief or the reinforcement of an old one; (2) a perceived rationale to support that leap--an arguer must accept reasons why the claim leaped to is worthy at least of being entertained; (3) a choice among two or more competing options; (4) a regulation of uncertainty--if people have too little uncertainty to regulate, they have no problems to solve and argument isn't necessary; (5) a willingness to risk confrontation of a claim with peers; and (6) a frame of reference shared optimally--arguers must share to an optimal degree elements of one another's world views. (HOD)

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WHERE IS ARGUMENT?

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WHERE IS ARGUMENT?

Wayne Brockriede

Before looking for clues that may lead to the discovery of where argument is, perhaps I should state some of my biases so you may be less surprised if I don't go immediately to where you presume I'd find the culprit without difficulty. My principal bias is a humanistic point of view that denies an interest in logical systems, in messages, in reasoning, in evidence, or in propositions--unless these things involve human activity rather directly. Arguments are not in statements but in people. Furthermore, argument isn't a thing to be looked for but a construct people use, a perspective they take. Human activity doesn't usefully constitute an argument until some person perceives what is happening as an argument. Although defining argument on this basis isn't as neat as speaking of necessary and sufficient conditions, seeing argument as a human activity encourages a person to take into account the conceptual choices of the relevant people. Hence a first clue: only people can find and label argument, and they will find it in the vicinity of people.

Second, because argument is a human activity, a way of seeing, it is potentially everywhere. During the past three years some undergraduate students at the University of Colorado have found arguments lurking in some strange places. We asked them specifically to look for it beyond the traditional habitats of the law courts or the legislative assemblies and to look in such exotic places as the aesthetic

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experience, the interpersonal transaction, and the construction of scientific theory or the reporting of research studies. I've read some interesting papers by students who've applied an argumentative perspective to Bernstein's Kaddish symphony, to marriage and divorce, and to Thomas Kuhn's Structure of Scientific Revolution. I've been able to maintain my bias that a second clue is that at any moment the perspective of argument may pop up unexpectedly in a person's head.

Third, even so, not all behavior and not all communication is usefully called argument. At this moment I see six characteristics that may help a person decide whether argument is an appropriate perspective for studying a communicative act. These characteristics, taken as six ways of looking at a similar gestalt, define argument as a process whereby people reason their way from one set of problematic ideas to the choice of another. The six characteristics of this construct of argument imply three primary dimensions: argument is problematic, it is based on the perceptions and choices of people, and its rationality is grounded in a variable logic of more or less rather than a categorical logic of yes or no.

Characteristic One--an inferential leap from existing beliefs to the adoption of a new belief or the reinforcement of an old one. One way to explain what I mean by an inferential leap is to contrast an argument of the sort I'm talking about with a syllogism, the most famous / member of the analytic family. Because its conclusion is entailed by the premises, no inferential leap is needed: nothing

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is stated in the conclusion of a syllogism that isn't stated in the premises. As long as people stay within the closed system of a syllogism, nothing is problematic. To question a definition or a premise, people must leave that closed system by leaping inferentially into uncertainty, and by doing so they may then make my kind of argument. To function as an argument an inferential leap occupies the midrange of the more-or-less continuum. A person has little to argue about if the conclusion doesn't extend beyond the materials of an argument or extends only slightly; but one may be unable to make a convincing argument if the leap is too large, perhaps perceived as suicidal.

Characteristic Two--a perceived rationale to support that leap. An arguer must accept reasons why the claim leaped to is worthy at least of being entertained. The weakest acceptable rationale may only justify saying that a claim reached by an inferential leap deserves entertainment for "the sake of argument." A stronger rationale may justify a person's taking a claim seriously, with the hope that after further thought it may be accepted. A still stronger rationale may convince a person to accept a claim tentatively until a better alternative comes along. If a rationale is too slender to justify a leap, the result is a quibble rather than an argument; but a rationale so strong a conclusion is entailed removes the activity from the realm of the problematic and hence from the realm of argument. If the perceived rationale occupies either polar region, it fails by my definition to justify the label of argument because the

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inferential leap either appears ridiculous (not worth arguing about) or suicidal (too risky to entertain).

Characteristic Three--a choice among two or more competing options. When people quibble or play the analytic game, they don't make arguments because they don't see a situation as yielding more than one legitimate claim. The right to choose is a human characteristic. People aren't free to choose without constraints. They're limited by what they know, what they believe, what they value. They're limited by how they can relate to other people and to situations. They're limited by cause and by chance. But within such constraints people who argue have some choice but not too much. If they have too little choice, if a belief is entailed by formal logic or required by their status as true believers, they need not argue; but if they have too much choice, if they have to deal with choice overload, then argument may not be very productive.

Characteristic Four--a regulation of uncertainty. Because arguers make inferential leaps that take claims beyond a rationale on which they're based, because they choose from among disputed options, they can't reach certainty. The function of argument ususally is to reduce uncertainty, but sometimes a strategy of confrontation may be needed to increase uncertainty enough to get people's attention. Only then may such people be receptive to arguments designed to reduce uncertainty. If people have too little uncertainty to regulate, then they have no problems to solve and argument isn't necessary. But if the regulation of uncertainty is too difficult, if people have too

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much trouble reducing or escalating the degree of uncertainty, then they may be unable or unwilling to argue.

Characteristic Five--a willingness to risk confrontation of a claim with peers. Arguers can't reduce uncertainty very much until their claim meets two tests of confrontation--with self and with others. A person confronting self has no public risk (unless someone overhears one self arguing aloud with another self), but the private risk is that an important claim or an important part of a self may have to go. When two persons engage in mutual confrontation so they can share a rational choice, they share the risks of what that confrontation may do to change their ideas, their selves, and their relationship with one another. If the leap is too little, the rationale too minimal, the choice too slender, the problem of uncertainty-reduction too miniscule, then the potential risk of disconfirmation after confrontation probably isn't enough to justify calling the behavior argument. But if these characteristics are too overwhelming, the risk may be too great and a person may be unwilling to subject an idea through argument to confrontation and almost certain disconfirmation.

Characteristic Six--a frame of reference shared optimally. While working on a doctoral dissertation on a transactional view of the argumentative perspective toward aesthetic experience, Karen Rasmussen wrote a chapter on argument that added a sixth characteristic to the five of my original construct. She argued that arguers must share to an optimal degree elements of one another's world views.

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This idea squares with the position Peter A. Schouls took in an article that appeared five years ago in Philosophy and Rhetoric. Professional philosophers and other people can't argue with one another very effectively if their presuppositions share too little or are virtually irreconcilable, but argument is poihtless is two persons share too much. Kenneth Burke's doctrine of identification implies that polar extremes are null categories, that the uniqueness of individuals makes for at least some divisiveness (which occasionally makes argument necessary), but on the other hand individuals are consubstantial in sharing at least a few properties with others (which occasionally makes argument possible).

So this is my argument about where argument may be discovered --among people and by people, potentially everywhere, but especially where six characteristics are involved. The construct I propose is, first, squarely within the realm of the problematic: what people argue about are nontrivial enough to pose problems that are tough enough to persist for some time as problems. Whether a problematic experience is to be called an argument, second, depends on the perceptions and choices of people who will decide whether viewing an activity as argument is appropriate. Third, each characteristic and the construct as a whole lies within the midrange of the more-or-less continuum. If communicative behavior is not perceived as problematic enough or if characteristics are perceived as too minimal--no argument. But too much of the problematic character or too much potency of the characteristics--no argument.